

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2023

Practicing Wonder in a Thin Place

by Jess Elfring-Roberts

Always be on the lookout for the presence of wonder.

—E.B. White

One night years ago while I was a camp counselor, I led a group of very excited middle-school campers through an open field as we headed toward our overnight camping spot. The grass was overgrown and the only light to guide us came from the stars and the reflection of the moon.

At one point, I asked the campers to stop and take a moment to be still and watch. After a really brief pause to look around, the kids started talking and laughing, not really engaged in the activity I had invited them to be a part of.

Then something happened. A glow came from the top of one of the grass blades. Then another. Then another. One by one the campers became silent. The field began to shimmer with light dancing from one blade to the next. For the next ten minutes we stood in awed silence as we watched lightning bugs communicating with each other across a vast field.

When we are young, many of us are introduced to Jesus as the light. We have the opportunity to engage in activities, games, and conversations about him as a source of light and love. As we get older, often we forget the playfulness and joy we once experienced of Jesus being the light in our lives. We may feel too vulnerable to play and instead shut that part of ourselves away, hiding our authentic selves. That's why spaces like camp have become so vital to not losing who we are, and whose we are.

That summer night, we could have walked through the field without ever noticing the lightning bugs, but we didn't. We took a moment to be still. And in the stillness, that moment opened up a thin place for our campers.



Monday, December 18, 2023

Wonder and Thin Places

by Scott Stoner

The key to the seeker's quest is not in finding just the right piece of holy real estate on which to stand, but rather in so preparing his or her awareness that any space he or she occupies can become thin through faith.

—Steven Charleston

In yesterday's reflection, Jess Elfring-Roberts described thin places as places where we naturally experience wonder. She wrote: "A thin place is a location where the distance between God and Heaven and the Earth is thin. It is a place where deep transformation can happen as we strengthen our personal connection to God."

Most of us can think of a physical space that has been or is a thin place for us. It could be the beach, the woods, a mountain, a camp, a river, our grandparent's home, a church, a park, or a retreat center. Maybe it's a place where we vacation, and perhaps it's our own backyard or a nearby park. In addition to a particular location, thin places can be felt in any experience in life where the veil between ourselves and God is lifted. The quote from Steven Charleston reminds us that our more direct connections with the Holy can and do happen *anywhere*.

As a pastor and psychotherapist, I have had the honor to walk with people in times of significant vulnerability and wonder—the birth of a child, the loss of a loved one, a terminal diagnosis, the joy of a baptism—to name just a few. In these moments, one's vulnerability often creates an opening for a deeper awareness of God's presence.

This week we will focus on the connection between wonder and thin places—be they physical, spiritual, emotional, or relational.

Making It Personal: What is or has been a physical thin place for you? Think about why you associate wonder or awe with this place. What happens there? What is your response to Steve Charleston's insight that any place can "become thin through faith"?

Tuesday, December 19, 2023

The Music of Christmas

by Scott Stoner

*Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us
shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.*

—Psalm 95:1

One of the most memorable parts of the holiday season is its music. What would Christmas celebrations be without songs like *Joy to the World*; *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*; *The First Noel*; *Angels We Have Heard on High*; and *Silent Night*?

Each of us has our own favorite Christmas music or songs. Some of us prefer classical tunes, while others enjoy popular arrangements. Certain songs may be special to us because they remind us of a person we love or a special moment or celebration that included that song. Every time we hear it, we are filled with love for and memories of that person or moment.

Music is a thin place for many, where the distance between themselves and God is narrowed. It has been said that music is the language of the soul and that those who sing, pray twice.

When I served as a full-time pastor of a church, I used to love visiting the elderly members of our church. I always brought my guitar with me on those visits. I vividly remember one Christmas Eve when I visited a 98-year-old woman in a retirement community. She could not get out of bed that day, but asked me to play some Christmas songs on my guitar. I started singing and in a short time, a pop-up gathering of some twenty other residents and staff were all in her room singing “Silent Night” together. It was a moment—a thin place indeed—that I will never forget.

Making It Personal: Do you have a favorite Christmas song or two that evokes special memories? What other songs or kinds of music help you feel closer to God? How could you use music this Advent season to feel closer to God?



Wednesday, December 20, 2023

Thresholds and Thin Places

by Robbin Brent

At any time you can ask yourself: “At which threshold am I now standing? At this time in my life, what am I leaving? Where am I about to enter?”... A threshold is not simply a boundary, but it is a frontier that cannot be crossed without the heart being passionately engaged and woken up.

—John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*

As I reflected on Advent and thin places, one threshold memory surfaced. It was a sweltering August afternoon, and I was more than a little cranky, hot, and resentful that we were spending the day doing something I really didn’t want to be doing. While deciding which of the many paths to take on the 500-acre Meher Baba Center—a spiritual oasis in an ocean of commerce—a woman in a bright yellow rain slicker materialized and greeted us with, “The abode is open today. Would you like to go in?” My companion said “yes!” immediately and so we set off, following her on a wooded trail until she stopped beside a tall wooden fence and said, “Here it is.” I turned toward the opening in the fence, and then turned back to thank her but she was somehow already gone.

As soon as I walked through the gate, I fell to my knees. My hands came up in a prayer position and I began weeping. There are no words to describe this experience, but perhaps awe and wonder are a good place to start. I had crossed a threshold into a thin place I did not know was there. I don’t know how long I stayed in that position, but when I got to my feet, my heart was wide open and at ease. I joined with many others who had crossed that threshold into the presence of an energy, of love, that was so much bigger than us, yet included us in its embrace.

Making it Personal: Can you think of a threshold experience in your life? What are you noticing during this threshold time of Advent in your own spiritual journey?

Thursday, December 21, 2023

True Wonder and Joy

by Scott Stoner

*Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep
this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep.*

—Book of Common Prayer

Today is the date of the winter solstice, meaning tonight will be the longest night of the year. Related to this solstice, many churches will be offering a “longest night” service this week, with the intention of ministering especially to those experiencing grief and loss during the holidays.

I wrote about grief in my reflection on December 5, and today I want to reflect again on grief, but this time with the insight that grief can be a thin place for many people.

This is the time of year I miss my grandmother tremendously. Every year I could not wait for her to come and stay with us for the two weeks before Christmas. As I open myself to grief, I also open my heart to memories of her love and how she modeled profound faith and resilience after having experienced some profound losses early in her life. This grief is indeed a thin place for me, a place of deep connection with my grandmother, a place where grief and love join with God’s love and wonder, which she embodied for me. Two gifts that continue to inspire and guide me to this day.

The prayer above is from the *Book of Common Prayer* service of Compline, or Night Prayer. Here is the conclusion of that end-of-the-day prayer: “Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love’s sake. *Amen.*”

Making It Personal: Have you ever experienced grief as a thin place, a time when you have felt or even now feel God’s love? What happened to you or for you during that time? When you pray the prayer from Compline, what phrase or line most speaks to you?



Friday, December 22, 2023

Birth, Wonder, and Thin Places

by Robbin Brent

*And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.”*

—Luke 1:46-49

Scott Stoner’s writing earlier about the experience of wonder in the presence of new life brought to mind a thin place I recently entered as I held my newest grandson just moments after his birth. In the midst of the chaotic bustle of medical staff, equipment, noise, and bright lights, the moment I felt his weight and warmth, time stood still and everything receded as I fell into the presence of this new being.

Looking at his tiny beautiful features, I was awash in awe, wonder, and profound gratitude for his safe arrival. I love to hold babies because I imagine I can see God in their gaze. They were looking at God just moments before they arrived, and the smell of heaven still lingers on their skin.

As we draw closer to the birth of Jesus, we are bearing witness to Mary’s anticipation of the imminent birth of her beloved baby. And even in the midst of all the chaos, confusion, and uncertainty she is facing, I imagine that she will see God in the gaze of her newborn baby.

Making it Personal: When you reflect on wonder and thin places, what experiences and memories come to mind? Does the idea of Mary giving birth to the savior of the world in a manger inspire any new ideas about how God can make any place a thin place full of wonder?

Saturday, December 23, 2023

The Lord Is in This Place

by Scott Stoner

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

—Genesis 28:16

I have, and know friends who have, traveled to places like the Camino de Santiago in Spain, drawn to the sites because we feel the nearness of God there. As wonderful as these faraway places are, we have learned in our reflections this week that God can be experienced in places quite ordinary and close to home. In the book of Genesis, for example, we read that Jacob experienced God's presence in a dream at Bethel, a site in the pastoral mountains of ancient Samaria, causing him to proclaim, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."

I have nothing against traveling to faraway places to experience the Holy. However, Jacob's words remind me that God is everywhere, always close to me, always inhabiting the ordinary places of my life, and like Jacob, often I don't recognize it. Jesus sometimes talks about "having eyes to see and ears to hear." With such eyes and ears, all places can be thin and holy.

Many of us will gather with friends and families in our homes and communities of faith over the next few days. May our eyes and ears, during these days and always, be open to the presence of God so that we, like Jacob, can realize that, surely, God is in these places.

Making It Personal: Have you traveled to a faraway place where you experienced the nearness of God? Is there a place closer to home that is a thin place for you? How might you best prepare your heart and soul so that you have "eyes to see and ears to hear" the presence of God in any gatherings you will be a part of over the next few days?
